

A Private Place

by Robert R. Monroe

I first became aware of Reflections while taking the bus to work. Katherine had taken the car with her night before, so I had no choice but to depend on public transportation. I was twenty minutes late, having overestimated the efficiency of public transit and having been slow to leave the house. I considered using the subway but something about the expansive system of tunnels and stations bothered me. You can't tell where the subway begins or ends, if it is the car or the station, in a moving vessel or the stained white tile halls. A bus is clean cut. Step on board and enter a pocket of culture, step off and step back into the world where there is space between our bodies.

The advertisement occupied the valuable empty space on the brown plastic back of a seat, perfectly aligned with my eyes as I slouched in my own seat. The happy, radiant people of the poster drew me away from the colorless mass of commuters, their smiling faces counterpoint to the blank faces of people avoiding eye contact with anyone who may see them, not wanting to communicate anything. "Reflections" was written in strong, bold type across the bright blue backdrop. Below was the slogan, in a script nearly too stylized to read: "A private place for public reflection."

I thought nothing of the words and examined the faces and bodies of the models until the bus came to a stop in front of my office. I stood up, pushed my way out and began to think of a good excuse for my tardiness.

A few days later I was walking in the park. I had developed the habit a few months earlier and Katherine made no mistake in letting me know just how much it irritated her. The fact that I had been out walking hadn't bothered her, in fact she commended me when I began, telling me that I needed the fresh air and exercise. It was when I asked her never to join me on my walks that she became agitated. She soon asked me if I had even been going on walks, if I had been meeting someone after work. I told her no, I had just been walking. That was enough to keep her from asking again, but it wasn't enough to keep her around.

The park was appropriately sized; large enough that very little roar from the streets could penetrate the center. The sky above it had no giants made from steel and glass lurching into view. For months I had taken the same route through the park: straight down the wood chip path starting at the east gate, onward past young couples on benches and lonely men walking lonely dogs, take a left at the fountain memorializing war time nurses with a green bronze statue of a Artemis, her left breast slipping from her robe, inviting the eyes of pre-adolescent boys. Then along a curved path to the back end of the park hidden by trees and thick bushes. Few women came here after sunset, and any who did clutched canisters of pepper spray and car keys like claws. No thugs or loons came back here either, this far into the green, away from people to see them. Only middle-aged men with heavy shoulders walked these back paths.

The path ends and forks before an ivy covered fence. The green ivy and rusted red steel remind me of Christmas. Normally I took the path leading east, back around the outer edge of the park, back to the benches and dog walkers, back to those tall black gates. That was the path I had taken on my first walk and it had been my path ever since. But as

I stood there at this fork in the road I became seized by disgust and fear. Disgust for routine and fear for the indifference it brings.

The west path fell down a steep hill, a clean line to a gate opening to a street. This street, wide open and bright, was lined by coffee houses and independent bookstores, populated by young bodies with angular hair and illustrated skin. I couldn't find a street sign or any other reference as to what street it was.

I walked a few blocks north, hoping to come across a familiar intersecting street or even hail a passing cab. I reached the street's end before finding an escape. The street ended with the bulb of a cul-de-sac where a three story building of white marble squatted. The building was surrounded by tall clean walls with a gate like a mouth with a street for a tongue. A bronze plaque reading only "Reflections" was bolted to the smooth stone wall. Over the wall I could see a massive screen placed on the face of the building. A pair of large speakers were fixed on each side of the screen. On the screen and through the speakers a woman stared out blankly and confessed to having stolen a stapler from work. I entered the gate.

Inside was a courtyard, perfectly crafted with exotic plants with thick waxy leaves, white marble benches and white marble tables with glossy magazines and yellowed paperbacks. A bald man with thick glasses read a lifestyle magazine, his legs propped on the stone table. From under his faded black loafers, a brochure proclaimed in thick red letters, "Reflections: Sign Up for a Free Trial Session." A dark-eye woman watched the giant screen, a rosary clutched in her fingers.

“All right, Mr. Miller, all you have to do is fill this out and sign this waiver,” the secretary said with the cheer and wide mouth of a dental hygienist. “When you’re done just tell me and we can get you set up. There won’t be a wait.”

I filled out the form while standing at the desk, more than a little unnerved by the atmosphere of the waiting room. It was nearly identical to the waiting room of the therapist that Katherine had dragged me to last year. The therapist I so greatly disappointed.

As I handed the secretary the clipboard and filled out forms, she smiled broadly and rose from her desk. “Let’s get you started then.”

She led me down a long hall, no doors to other rooms along the full forty foot stretch, just small frames with artwork typically seen over the beds of cheap hotels. At the end of this hall was an unmarked door. The secretary slid a white card into the complicated locking mechanism. A green light and click. As she opened the door, florescent lights slowly flicked on, clearing away total darkness of the room and filling it with a soft hum. Inside this small room was a chair, flat-backed and with minimum padding. To the right of this chair was a simple control panel. In front of it was a mirror.

“Press the green button when you are ready to begin. Press the red button if you need to finish early. You have ten minutes. If you need help thinking of a topic for reflection, press the orange button for some suggestions.” I nodded and sat down in the chair, the back still warm from the last customer. “Happy reflecting, Mr. Miller,” said the secretary as she slipped out into the hall, the door locking sharply behind her.

Behind the mirror was camera, one that would automatically focus on my face, and cables to project my image onto the screen over the courtyard. A small microphone

hung from the ceiling on a thin wire, ready to broadcast my words. I pressed the green button, the lights dimmed slightly and I looked into my eyes.

TOM MILLER: My wife has left me. She says that I'm not being open with her, that I've become shut off from her. 'Disconnected' is the word she used. She says that she can't be married to a man like that. To a man who has forgotten how to be a husband. (*laughs*) I wish I could be like my other divorced friends and pretend that I don't agree with her, pretend that it is her fault, her misunderstanding. After all, she's the one who filed for divorce in the first place. Shouldn't that mean she's the one that failed? (*swallows hard and pauses*) I had been disconnected. I had been bored. I must have been. I had begun to fantasize about any woman other than her, just like I was in college again. But these fantasies were not all sexual, not all of them. A lot of times, usually when I was in bed, I would think about what it would be like to have dinner with other woman, to watch television, to subtly flirt, to lay quietly next to each other thinking of other people. I haven't

legitimately flirted with a woman in ten years.
I never acted on these thoughts. I've always
remained devoted to my wife. I just began to
hate being a husband. I never once hated
Katherine. Poor woman. (*inaudible*) Anyways, she
was right and now she's gone and now all I can
think about is having dinner with her. I can't
think about sex without thinking about her body.
I can't—Jesus Christ. (*presses STOP button*)

End of transcript.

A week later I dialed the phone number on the Reflections brochure the secretary
had given me as I tried to leave unseen. I set up an appointment for the next Wednesday.

(*presses PROMPT button*)

PROMPT: Did you have any pets as a child?
Perhaps a close relative had a pet that you grew
fond of. What was the pet? What was its name?
What do you think of when you remember this pet?

(*presses PROMPT button*)

PROMPT: How was work today? Did anything
out of the ordinary happen? Did nothing out of
the ordinary happen? How do you feel about that?

(*presses PROMPT button*)

PROMPT: Is there anything you feel like a failure about? Why do you feel this way? Don't you think that everyone makes mistakes now and then?

(presses PROMPT button)

PROMPT: Do you like pizza? What is your favorite topping? Did you eat much pizza as a child? What do you think about when you think about your perfect pizza?

(presses PROMPT button)

PROMPT: Are you in love? When you think of the perfect mate, what do you think of? Have you met this person yet?

(presses STOP button)

End of transcript.

As the door locked behind me, the florescent lights blinking just before the door closed, the secretary asked me if anything was wrong. I told her no, that I just wasn't feeling well. She asked me if I would like to reschedule my appointment, that I would not be charged full price for this session. I told her yes.

TOM MILLER: My sister thinks I'm crazy for doing this. She smiles and tells me that she's proud of me and that I look much better, that

whatever I'm doing must be working. But I can tell that she thinks this is stupid, me coming here and talking to no one and everyone. (*pauses, turns head to the right and scratches neck*) And she's right. This place is a pretty stupid set-up and it's the most expensive ten-minutes I've ever spent, but I don't know. I tried talking to myself after I shaved, you know, staring into the bathroom mirror, but I just couldn't do it. Somehow I felt as if I were judging myself, appraising the damage. This mirror (*gestures towards the camera*) isn't even a mirror. I know other people are seeing this, hearing whatever I'm saying. I guess the difference is just that, this mirror doesn't have an ending. But my sister is right. This is crazy.

I've started reading a book. I haven't read for pleasure since college. It's called *Optic Fiber Love* by an author whose name I can never remember when I don't have the book with me. He's big in Japan and I guess his publishers are hoping his success will carry over to America. I doubt it. He's too vague, too slow and too esoteric. But I like it. A translation of his

newest novel will be released next week. I've preordered a copy.

I saw Katherine the other day. She stopped by to get the rest of her things, shit that she has been living without for months. She dyed her hair blond. She looks so strange, not like a different person, but like an accidental copy of herself. She brought her sister along, who kept me in her sights as if I were suddenly going to jump on Katherine and take back what was forever promised to me. While my ex-wife took a piss, her sister tells me that Katherine has begun to see other people, that she's dating an investor at one of those companies with the glass walls and ugly postmodern statues in the lobby. I forced out a smile and nodded and said good for her. After they left I stood in our old room and looked at the new empty spaces and hunted for any trace of her scent. She had been wearing a new perfume, one that doesn't smell like anything real. I lay face down on the bed and tried to remember the fragrance of her sweat and the curves of her thighs.

End of transcript.

The new routine was this. Every Wednesday and Friday I walked through the park, turned west at the fence, straight to the white marble building. I got there two minutes before the appointment. If I was ever early I would simple slow down my pace, take smaller steps, spend more time in the park or look closer at the storefronts. I'd enter the gate, make a beeline for the building's door and to the secretary's desk. She would see me coming, stand and smile and greet me by name, always Mr. Miller, and walk with me down that hall. White card in the lock, green light and click. She would leave me alone and I'd say my part. On my way out the secretary asked me if I'd like the same times next week and without breaking my stride I would tell her of course. I'd then cut straight through the courtyard, not making eye contact with anyone who might be there, and head back to the park and its east gate.

That was the routine.

I had suddenly been given the day off, a reward for my recent performance at an important convention. My supervisor leaned across my desk, his fat red fingers spread wide across the reports I had been examining, and told me that he had never expected me to get so many units sold, that this would be a record year. He grabbed a hold of my hand, shook it and pulled me out of my chair. Draping a thick, soft arm across my shoulders, he told me that effective immediately I was on two weeks vacation. With his free arm he slipped two tickets in my shirt pocket, told me that the game ought to be a good one and that even my wife would love it. With a hard pat on the back he pushed me towards the elevator. I didn't stop walking until I found myself on the west side of the park.

For the remainder of the afternoon I drank different kinds of coffee and listened to terrible poetry read by underdeveloped girls with perfectly colored hair. Every young poet trembled as they read out loud lines of despair and sex. Each one would look at me as they read, as if seeking approval. I sank down in my chair, trying to not feel like such an alien, such an anachronism. Time moved slowly, the hours before my appointment seemed to expand and elongate. I read a music magazine without recognizing a single band.

Not able to occupy myself further, I entered the white walls of the Reflections courtyard, fifteen minutes before my appointment. Nearly two dozen people were gathered in the courtyard, most of them the same pierced noses and tight shirts that I had seen during my day-trip into youth culture. Most stared at the screen on the wall, smoking sweet cigarettes and stroking each other's arms. A few stared at me.

I had never noticed so many kids here before. Usually there were only old, empty looking people here, at least in those early days when I looked up as I walked through the courtyard. And then I realized that I had only looked at my feet when I entered and exited this building for the past few months. There could have been thousands crammed into the courtyard and I would never have noticed.

“My wife has left me. She says that I’m not being open with her...”

A girl, not old enough to be out of college, projected her voice and image on the wall. She black hair tussled and tinted to perfection, red plastic frames settled on her long nose. Her eyes were large, dark and sweet. She had silver crescent moons hanging from her ears and she recited my first confession word-for-word.

“I never once hated Katherine.”

I waited for her, leaning stiff against the cold wall near the building's door. When she had finished speaking my words, the kids crammed into the courtyard clapped calmly, and looked towards me, hoping to register a reaction.

When she finally entered the courtyard there was a second, smaller pulse of applause. She was wearing a long brown skirt, a style that girls worn when I was in high school. Her head turned in my direction as she soaked up the praise. She smirked, winked and headed for the gate.

I ran after her, grabbing her arm and stopping her before she stepped onto the street. "What the hell was that?"

"Shit," she said, flexing her eyebrow, "you ought to know."

"Who the hell do you think you are?"

She twisted her wrist from my grasp, shifted her weight onto her left foot and smiled with what I would later recognize as sweetness. "I'm Rosemary and I'm a big fan of yours, Tom." She glanced back into the courtyard where four dozen young eyes watched us.

"Fan? What are you talking about?"

Rosemary sucked on the inside of her right cheek, clearly thinking of the best way to explain herself to the angry adult before her. "You see," she began, "we've come to appreciate the medium that Reflections has given us. It's great stuff, becoming someone else but still being so very obviously yourself, broadcasting your face and voice with the thoughts and emotions of a person you don't know." She shrugged slightly and winked at me, "Well, barely know."

“You’ve got to be kidding me. These aren’t scripts in a high school play. These are the private thoughts of human beings.”

“These aren’t private thoughts, Tom.” Rosemary nudged her head towards the giant monitor, now greenish black in its idleness. “They are everyone’s once they come up on the screen.”

The mass of bodies in the courtyard began to murmur affirmation of Rosemary’s proclamation of ownership. I glared at them and they shut up. Leaning close to her ear, so that the others could not hear, I whispered to Rosemary, “You can’t get away with this.” I pushed past her and walked quickly back to the park.

Behind me I could hear Rosemary call me a disappointment.

I had become a celebrity. As I walk away from Reflections that night I was followed by countless disappointed young eyes. A young man sitting against the fence of the park read a photocopied magazine with a photograph of me on the cover. I took it from him and continued home.

The magazine, little more than badly photocopied sheets of paper stapled into the shape of a book, was called *The Mirror* and reported on various elements of Reflections and fitted them into the realm of arts and entertainment. Forced it all into a neat little subculture. There was a lengthy article on me, complete with selected transcripts of my sessions. My stomach tightened at the thought of someone writing down my words as I said them. Towards the end of the article was a quote from Rosemary Carter, Reflections artist, praising me for my honesty and my “unparalleled poetics.” There was then a plug for her show, every Wednesday at quarter-to-six.

I called the Reflections office once I arrived home. The secretary sighed as she apologized to me, saying it must be awful to be treated like that, exploited by so many strangers. I asked her how the kids had gotten a hold of my transcripts, how they were allowed to make a mockery out of my confessions. She explained calmly that they suspect that someone at the office (she suspected the janitor who was “a punk just like that Rosemary girl”) had leaked some of the early transcripts. She made sure to mention that Reflections had reserved the right to make transcripts of any session and that I had given my consent to this when I signed my liability waiver. She then told me that she had seen several young people holding tape recorders to the speakers or pointing camcorders at the screen. They’re crazy, she said.

“Is there anything you can do about this?” I asked.

“No. After all, the screen and speakers project into a public place and who are we to say what someone can or can’t say during their sessions. They are paying customers.”

I thanked her and hung up.

There were three homemade magazines and six video cassettes related to Reflections and its appropriation by these kids. One video was nothing but clips from my sessions starting a few months back. It was the second volume in the Tom Miller Collection. As I shifted through the magazines, I could feel the eyes of the young people crowding into the bookstore. Some were looking on with admiration while others watched me in fear.

The girl who rang up the magazines and videos was smiling, her eyes dancing from the register, price tags and my face. She asked for my autograph before I left for my appointment.

TOM MILLER: *(is silent for a few minutes after sitting down)* I wish I could say that I don't understand what has happened, that I could play innocent and not be a part of all this. But I did and it felt good and I know why it did.
(pauses and looks directly into the camera)

Outside Rosemary is ripping down the flyers posted on the white marble walls and the surrounding storefronts and light poles. A grainy photograph of her, taken directly from the video feed, the word "FRAUD" obscuring parts of her face, her sweetly snide smile and her big black-hole eyes. She is watched with disapproving eyes as she frantically rushes from flyer to flyer. She is probably wondering how I could have done this to her, her hero disgracing her. In the morning an entire subculture will find her abhorrent. This is the authority they have given me.

I've got another idea for these kids.

TOM MILLER: I guess I have someone to thank for this. And of course there are all my adoring fans. *(reaches into his jacket, produces a large stone. He stands. He throws the stone into the*

*mirror, shattering it. The stone misses the
camera. He sits back down and smiles looking
into the camera)*

In the dark space once hidden by the mirror, the robotic eye of a high tech camera stares unblinkingly into my face. Soon the secretary will be opening up the door, demanding to know what I thought I was doing. I haven't got much time.

I stare into that cold glass eye and deliver my message. Outside a generation feels a paradigm shift and rug move under their feet.